

THE SELF-EXPERIENCE OF THE SELF

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Charles Larmore sums up in three statements the traditional position of philosophy about the self (with particular reference to René Descartes and John Locke): 1) it is impossible to be a self without being in relation with itself; 2) the relation that the self has with itself (and by which it is a self) is a cognitive relation, it is a self-knowledge; 3) this relation of self-knowledge is of the same kind as the cognitive relation that the self has with the objects of the world. Larmore criticizes statements 2 and 3 and maintains that the relation (of the self with itself) in which the nature of the self consists is not cognitive, but practical and normative: the nature of the self is the same relation of commitment that exists between my beliefs and my actions; each of my beliefs commits me to behave a certain way. In this paper, I want to refute Larmore's criticism of statement 2 and to show, following Michel Henry, that the relation in which the nature of the self consists is actually a self-experience; I maintain that we can affirm statement 2 of the traditional position about the self without being forced to affirm also statement 3.

Keywords: the self, self-knowledge, self-experience, Charles Larmore.

In his book *Les pratiques du moi* (Larmore 2004), in his Italian lectures published in *Dare ragioni* (Larmore 2008) and in his dialogue with Vincent Descombes published as *Dernières nouvelles du moi*, (Descombes; Larmore 2009), Charles Larmore states that the self (every self) is a self because of an essential relation with itself. Larmore writes that this concept of the self is largely widespread in the philosophical tradition, and he sums up in three statements the traditional position of philosophy on this topic (with particular reference to René Descartes and John Locke): 1) it is impossible to be a self without being in relation with itself; 2) the relation that the self has with itself (and by which it is a self) is a cognitive relation, it is a self-knowledge; 3) this relation of self-knowledge is of the same kind as the cognitive relation that the self has with the objects of the world.

Larmore criticizes this position starting from statement 3: he declares that this statement brings about indefensible paradoxes, because it claims to conceive a knowledge in which the subject and the object coincide, from the pattern of a knowledge in which they are necessarily distinct. Moreover, he claims that this refutation of statement 3 involves giving up statement 2: speaking of a knowledge that is necessarily different from the knowledge of outer objects, of a knowledge in which there is no distinction between subject and object, means to bring a mystery into philosophy; how could we conceive such knowledge? Do we really know what we are talking about? Larmore's thesis, therefore, is that the relation (of the self with itself) in which the nature of the self consists is not cognitive, but practical and normative: the nature of the self is the

same relation of commitment that exists between my beliefs and my actions; each of my beliefs commits me to behave in a certain way.

Now it is possible to ask: how can I know myself? Certainly, the statement that the relation by which the self is a self is not cognitive doesn't imply that the self can't know itself: however, how can this knowledge take place? Larmore writes that every claim according to which there is a knowledge that is different from the knowledge of outer objects ends in mystery and so it has to be rejected; so the self can know itself only as an object, taking (in regard to itself) the point of view of an outer observer (somehow redoubling itself in a subject and an object), without claiming to have any preferential cognitive access to itself. For this reason, writes Larmore, often other people understand better than we do the motives of our actions, and we know ourselves so well not because of a preferential cognitive access to ourselves, but just because, thinking so often about ourselves, we have become specialists in the cognition of ourselves.

Here Larmore's thesis shows its weak point: do I really know myself only by looking at myself from the outside? Larmore locates the nature of the self in the relation between beliefs and behaviors, so I propose to consider (for the moment) only these two aspects of the self. As concerns my behaviors, the view according to which I can know them only from an outer point of view can have some credibility. As concerns beliefs, however, things look different: I can actually know the beliefs of another person only by conjecture, by looking at the behaviors of this other person (also

including the outspoken statements of this person), but I think I know my own beliefs also without the observation of my own behaviors; therefore, the source of the knowledge that I have of my own beliefs seems to be different from the source of the knowledge that I have of other people's beliefs (this statement, however, doesn't mean that I have always a perfect clearness about my own beliefs).

Larmore, however, would not accept my argument; he doesn't deny that I can obtain clearness about my beliefs independently from the observation of my behaviors, but he thinks that this is not a real cognitive act through which I know beliefs that I already have, but a practical reflection through which I take a side, espouse a belief, take a commitment. However, we can call off for the moment our consideration of beliefs; as concerns other aspects of the self, such as feelings or pleasure and pain, what I have expounded before is incontestably valid: I can know that another person is sad only by observing his behavior, but in feeling sad I have an immediate self-experience of myself (of my *Erlebnis*) that doesn't originate from observing myself from the outside and can't be interpreted as taking a side. So it is undeniable that I have a self-experience of my feelings, which is radically different from the consciousness that I can have of other people's feelings.

This self-experience is completely private for the person who lives it, it is exclusive and personal: I can experience in this way *only my* feelings, my *Erlebnisse*. For this reason I can state that this kind of experience is *essential* to the self: it is impossible to speak about the self putting on one side this kind of experience (in opposition to

Larmore's conceptions, according to which the self-relation that makes a self to be a self is not a relation of self-knowledge or self-experience). It is necessary to distinguish here the concept "self" from the concepts "person" and "mind": as Larmore writes, "being a self" means being a self for itself; only of myself, indeed, I can say "my-self", whereas I have to consider both myself and other people as persons and as beings endowed with a mind. It is not merely a terminological distinction: actually, the question of the self concerns a dimension (of experience and of reality) that is *exclusively mine*; to suitably develop the question of the self, it is necessary to consider and explain the essential distinction of the *self*, of *my-self*, from the *others*, i.e. from any human being of which we consider that this human being is a self *only for himself or herself*, as I am a self only for myself; this is the basis of the possibility to speak about "other selves". We can build a theory of mind as a description of an outer object or of an outer process that can be known in third person as any other outer object, but this theory can't be a theory of the self; so I think that we can say that Larmore's theory is a theory of the mind, not a theory of the self; Larmore, however, consider this two terms as basically equivalent (Larmore 2008: 97).

It seems necessary, therefore, to restore statement 2 against Larmore's attempt to deny it: the essential self-relation that makes a self be a self is a self-experience. However, to reject Larmore's attempt to deny statement 2, it is not sufficient to show that statement 2 is indispensable; we also have to refute Larmore's objection against all the conceptions (the most important

representative of which is, according to Larmore, Johann Gottlieb Fichte) that reject statements 3 and accept statement 2, and so maintain that the nature of the self consists in a self-knowledge, but also that this self-knowledge is radically different from the knowledge we have of outer objects. According to Larmore, as seen before, if we maintain that such knowledge exists, we actually can't show what kind of knowledge it could be; so philosophy loses itself in mystery. It is necessary to get out of his difficulty, and the only way to get out is to show that the particular kind of experience that we have of ourselves is not mysterious at all.

I think that this is what Michel Henry did, using the phenomenological method; using the instruments of phenomenology, Michel Henry showed that there is a kind of experience that is completely different from the experience of the outer objects, and this experience is actually the self-experience of the self. This kind of experience is the experience of the self that concerns our feelings. What distinguishes this kind of experience from any kind of knowledge of outer objects is actually its immanent character, in opposition to the transcendent character (in the phenomenological meaning of "transcendent" as the turning of the consciousness outside of itself, as its intentionally going beyond itself towards an outer object) of our knowledge of outer objects; in the experience that we have of our feelings, indeed, there is no distance between the consciousness that feels, what is felt, and the very act of feeling. If we think of sadness, for example, there is no distance not only between the living individual who feels sadness (as an *Erlebnis*) and the very sadness

that he feels, but also between what appears and its appearing; there is no distinction between sadness and feeling sadness; sadness *is* feeling sadness, and there is no sadness that is not a *felt* sadness. This immanent appearing concerns not only *feelings*, but also other *Erlebnisse*, for instance, other subjective states that are more clearly connected with the processes that happen in our body (such as pleasure, pain, hunger), or the awareness of our powers, such as the awareness to be able to move an arm or to walk.

The consideration of this immanent experience, therefore, is what we were seeking in order to understand how it is possible that the most essential aspect of the nature of the self consists in a relation of self-knowledge or, better, of self-experience. Now it is possible to answer to Larmore's objection¹: a similar self-experience is nothing exceptional and mysterious, but it is rather the commonest experience, the everyday experience of pleasure and pain, of joy and sadness.

Perhaps here the doubt can arise that with these reflections the existence of this kind of experience is maintained, but not really explained and justified. However, do we really think that it is possible to explain our simplest experiences? For instance, does it make sense to ask for an explanation of the fact that we see, or that we hear? Clearly, a physiological explanation is possible, but it is not able to explain really our experience of seeing or hearing, because between a material process that takes place in our objective body and that can be scientifically

described, on one side, and an immanent *Erlebnis* that is felt in the first person as the experience of seeing or hearing, on the other side, there is necessarily a gap that objective and causal explanations can't overcome. Other hypothetical answers to the question "Why do we see?" could perhaps come from speculative metaphysics, but phenomenology couldn't even try to answer to this; what phenomenology can do is describe the structures of having sensations. Similarly, therefore, we also have to admit that the assertion of the existence of an immanent experience, in which feelings and other *Erlebnisse* as pleasure and pain consist, doesn't need (unless we want to get in the field of speculative metaphysics) further fundamental explanation, but rather a development towards the description of the fundamental characters of this very experience.

I think it is appropriate to formulate two corollaries of this theory of the immanent self-experience of the self: the first concerns the particular kind of epistemic validity that a phenomenological description of this immanent self-experience can have, above all regarding the claim of the universality of such description: what kind of universality this description of the self can have? The phenomenologist who practices such a description can do it only beginning from her or his personal lived experience; so the phenomenologist speaks first of all about himself or herself. However the phenomenologist can't speak *only* about herself or himself; in order that the phenomenologist's reflections have a philosophical validity it is necessary that each of us, being a self for himself or herself, can learn something about herself or himself from the phenom-

¹ Larmore explicitly expresses this objection also towards Michel Henry (Larmore 2004: 98–99).

enologist's descriptions; these descriptions, therefore, have to claim universality. The phenomenologist, however, has to accept that his or her descriptions have a very specific kind of universality, which is different from the universality that is owed to natural science and also to other kinds of philosophy; these phenomenological descriptions, indeed, aren't related to a transcendent reality that can be object of a "public" verification, but to private *Erlebnisse* of the individual, i.e. to *Erlebnisse* that each individual can find only in itself. So, everyone has to search in herself or himself for the confirmation or denial of these phenomenological descriptions. The universality of a physical law doesn't consist in the fact that everybody who has the opportunity to verify it finds out that the law is confirmed; this fact is just the necessary consequence of the universal validity of the law. On the contrary, the universality of every statement of the phenomenological description of the self can consist only in the fact that every self feels in itself the *Erlebnisse* that this very statement describes; so two statements like "every unsatisfied need generates suffering" and "every time I (and every other self) have an unsatisfied need, I (and every other self) feel suffering" don't have a relation of implication, but only the relation that exists between a statement and its explicitation; the second statement adds nothing to the first; if this could appear as contrary to the laws of logic, that is only because we don't consider that need and suffering are always *felt* need and *felt* suffering, are always felt by the living self.

The second corollary concerns the concept of personal identity: the uniqueness of every self and its distinctions from others

are generally indicated as "identity" or "personal identity". These terms, however, seem too connected to an objectivistic perspective on the self; to speak about an identity of the subject, it seems necessary to consider it as an object among others; so this subject would distinguish itself from other objects (and particularly from the objects to which it is more similar, i.e. other human beings) by some characteristics (as every human being has some peculiarities that distinguish this human being from any other person). In fact, it is necessary to consider this problem from another point of view: the self is not an object among others, because the experience that the self has of itself belongs to a peculiar sphere of experience (a sphere that is peculiar only to the self, and is identical with the self), that is not involved in the opposition of subject and object. What distinguishes me (my-self) from any other one (however I can be similar to him or her) is actually the exclusive possession of *Erlebnisse* that I live in first person, i.e. the possession of an unshareable sphere; of a sphere that is exclusively mine (my pain is not any other person's pain). To denote this exclusivity, which defines perfectly my distinction from any other person, the term "identity" looks therefore unsuitable; perhaps it is better to use "ipseity", like Michel Henry does; "ipseity" (from the Latin "*ipse*") doesn't indicate the fact of being different from any other human being as an object is different from another, but rather the fact of living one's own life in first-person, the fact of being actually my-self.

It is necessary, as a conclusion, to underline a worrying consequence of this theory, i.e. the fact that it seems to deny any

possibility of authentic intersubjectivity: if the essential dimension of the self is that of private *Erlebnisse*, and if it is impossible to reach the *Erlebnisse* of another person, it is also impossible to reach really the other self in its authentic nature. So, the other person could appear to us only in how his or her exterior looks as a sensible object; any other person would be for us only a thing among things, and every participation in another person's joy or sorrow would be a feeling that would be *exclusively mine*; Michel Henry understands this consequence and tries to overcome it, examining the conceptions of the intersubjectivity that other phenomenologists, particularly Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler, elaborated; all these conceptions, however, are subjected

to the obstacle of the inaccessibility of other people's *Erlebnisse*. Henry's answer to the question of intersubjectivity consists in the assertion that the life of every single self is grounded in an absolute Life, and in the common ground of this absolute Life (that is, according to Henry, God's Life) the self can have an authentic affective relation with the subjectivity of every other self. Clearly, the risk of leaving phenomenology to venture into a doubtful speculative metaphysics is high for a similar conception; this answer by Henry to the problem of intersubjectivity should be examined in detail. Here, I can only say, as a conclusion, that the problem of intersubjectivity arises as a very serious question for a theory of the self that seems convincing in its fundamental aspects.

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SAVASTIES SAVIPATYRIMAS

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Santrauka

Charles'as Larmore'as trimis teiginiais apibendrina tradicinę filosofijos poziciją savasties (pats) atžvilgiu (konkrečiai remdamasis René Descartes'u ir Johnu Locke'u): 1) savastis negalima be santykio su savimi; 2) savasties santykis su savimi (dėl kurio ji ir yra savastis) yra pažintinis santykis, t. y. savižina; 3) šis savižinos santykis yra tokios pat rūšies pažintinis santykis kaip ir pažintinis santykis, kurį pats užmezga su pasaulio objektais. Larmore'as kritikuoja antrąjį ir trečiąjį teiginius ir tvirtina, kad šis santykis (savasties santykis su savimi), neatsiejamas nuo savasties prigimties, yra ne pažintinis, o praktinis ir normatyvinis: savasties prigimtis – tai tas pats išipareigojimo santykis, esantis tarp mano įsitikinimų ir veiksmų; kiekvienas mano įsitikinimų ipareigoja mane elgtis tam tikru būdu. Šio straipsnio autorius siekia atmesti Larmore'o pateiktą antrojo teiginio kritiką ir, sekdamas Micheliu Henry, parodyti, kad santykis, neatsiejamas nuo savasties prigimties, iš tikrųjų yra savi-patyrimas. Autoriaus teigimu, galime patvirtinti tradicinės pozicijos antrąjį teiginį apie savastį nebūdami priversti patvirtinti ir trečiąjį.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: savastis, savižina, savipatyrimas, Charles'as Larmore'as.